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ABSTRACT

Reflecting the view that a single formula for revolutionizing the teaching of writing is unavailable, this publication of the New York State English Council presents a series of articles dealing with various topics in the teaching of composition in high school and college settings. Subjects discussed include the following: the use of fables in the composition classroom, assessing students' attitudes towards writing, a report on the Western New York Writing Project, new assumptions and procedures in evaluating student writing, the use of the mystery plot in freshman college composition, and the selection of fruitful writing topics. (DF)

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NEW YORK STATE ENGLISH COUNCIL

the ENGLISH RECORD

VOLUME XXX WINTER 1979 NUMBER 1

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For the Record

THE ENGLISH RECORD is published four times a year (Winter, Spring, Summer, Fall) by the New York State English Council, an association of teachers of English language and literature. *The English Record* now incorporates the former *NYSEC Newsletter.*

MANUSCRIPTS on all aspects of English are invited. Manuscripts should be typed, double-spaced, and should include documentation within the text whenever possible. Manuscripts will be returned only if accompanied by an addressed envelope with sufficient postage enclosed.

PHOTOGRAPHS AND DRAWINGS are also published in *The Record*, and submissions are invited. Photographs should be glossy black-and-white, and, where appropriate, should be accompanied by standard model release forms.

NEWSLETTER items should be of general interest to the membership and should reach the Editorial Offices at least one month before publication. Deadline for the next issue will be found in the newsletter.

MEMBERSHIPS in the Council are available from the Executive Secretary. Cost of basic membership is $10. Overseas memberships cost $15. Student and retired memberships are availab ; at $5. Memberships run for the calendar year.

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ADVERTISING space is available in the Record. Inquiries should be made to the Executive Secretary.

THE NEXT ISSUE of **The English Record,** the Spring 1979 issue, will be general in nature. With any luck at all it will appear before the summer holidays, so newsletter items should be sent to the editorial offices in Brockport no later than April 15.

From the Editors

Teaching the Present Generation to write tolerable prose has been often difficult, frequently unsatisfying, and always the subject of a great deal of gratuitous advice, no matter when that Present Generation happened to live. Unlike Lindley Murray, author of the statement on our cover, we do not feel that a sound knowledge of the elements of English grammar will somehow improve the morals of our students; yet we continue to feel that writing is worth teaching.

Murray, product of a century of certainty, felt that all the rules of writing might well be condensed into one: "to communicate in correct language, and in the clearest and most natural order, the ideas we mean to transfuse into the minds of others." Less certain of what constitutes correct language and natural order, we often look for a brain transplant instead of the slower process of transfusion. We look for the English teacher's stone, which will somehow provide us with a method for making students write clearly.

Seventeen years of teaching writing has convinced us that the process is elusive and evolutionary. What works one time, fails another. What seems to improve one group of students, confuses their successors. We read articles in professional journals, wonder at the stupendous results chronicled therein, incorporate what we can of their contents, and go on evolving.

We cannot at this time present you with a formula for a writing revolution; therefore we are presenting a selection of a few of the better ideas which have crossed our desks, and we hope that these will aid in your evaluation.

We are especially happy to present our first account of the arrival in New York of the Bay Area Writers' Project, the immensely successful California program which uses interaction among teachers to replace pontification by experts. Such an approach is tradition among the Central California Council of Teachers of English, in which James Gray has long been an active member.

For many years the Council held an annual meeting at the Asilomar Conference Grounds in Pacific Grove. The format for the conference emphasized parity among the teachers and experts. No papers were presented; instead teachers and resource people pursued a single topic of interest — pedagogy, literature, composition—for three days. It is, like the Bay Area and Western New York Writing Projects, teachers teaching teachers.

We have decided that it is time for us to pass along the editorship of the English Record to other hands, effective after the last issue of the present volume, Fall 1979. We would encourage anyone interested in taking over the journal to contact the Executive Secretary.

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Our call for Fillips Taurus on page 27 may seem to be setting too close a deadline. Therefore we will happily receive manuscripts of student writing right on through Gemini and even Cancer.

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FABLES

in the Composition Classroom

Frank J. D'Angelo

For the past few years, I have been experimenting in the composition classroom with a series of rhetorical exercises derived from classical rhetoric called the *progymnasmata*. These exercises were designed by classical rhetoricians to enhance fluency in speaking and writing:

> The first two were narrative exercises in retelling FABLES and TALES from poetry and history. Next came the expository exercises of CHREIA and PROVERB, which taught the boys to develop a topic by iteration, enthymeme, contrast, illustration, example and the testimony of authority. REFUTATION and CONFIRMATION were argumentative exercises in analyzing such myths as that of Apollo and Daphne to show that the story was or was not obscure, incredible, impossible, inconsistent, unfitting, or inexpedient. The exercise of COMMONPLACE gave practice in enlarging on praise of virtue and dispraise of vice. The next exercises of ENCOMIUM and VITUPERATION taught how to praise a person or thing for being virtuous and to dispraise a person or thing for being vicious. The exercise of COMPARISON made but a slight step forward, showing which of two is better or worse. The exercise of IMPERSONATION, or PROSOPOPOEIA, required the pupil to compose an imaginary monologue which might appropriately be spoken or written by an historical, legendary, or fictitious person under given circumstances. The exercise in DESCRIPTION, in Greek ECPHRASIS, was designed to train the boys in vivid presentation of details of sight or sound. The THESIS was an exercise in deliberative oratory, arguing for or against a general question such as Should a man marry or seek office. The final elementary exercise, LEGISLATION, gave the boys practice in speaking for or against a law, usually one from ancient history.[1]

My interest in these classical exercises is not only that they present a graduated sequence of exercises, ranging from the simple to the most difficult, for the student to follow, but also that they are closely related to literary and humane studies. To my mind, they seem to bridge the gap between imaginative literature and exposition. This is true especially of the fable, which because of its narrative structure may be considered a genre of imaginative literature and because of its didacticism and direct statements (for example, its explicitly stated moral tags) may be viewed as a form of exposition.

The *progymnasmata*, in general, and the *fable*, in particular, can provide the basis for some interesting exercises in the composition classroom. What follows is an account of some practical ways in which fables can be used in the composition classroom to develop compositional skills. These exercises are either very loose adaptations of exercises from classical rhetoric or an attempt to capture their spirit. But before describing in detail the features of these exercises, let me briefly, for purposes of providing a suitable context, discuss the origin and characteristics of fables.[2]

Fables seemed to have originated in the talking beast tales that are found in many cultures. Eventually some of these tales acquired didactic or moralistic purposes. The earliest known fables are those (discovered in cuneiform texts) belonging to the Babylonians and Assyrians. One of the oldest collections of fables is the *Jatakas*, a collection of stories used by the early Buddhists in India to teach moral lessons. Another collection known as the *Panchatantra* was composed as a guide for the conduct and moral edification of princes. In the West, fables are associated with the Greek slave Aesop, who lived around 600 B.C., although some scholars doubt that he ever lived. There were, of course, fables in Greek literature before Aesop, particularly in the works of Hesiod and Archilochus. Other sources of fables are those of La Fontaine in France (who drew heavily on the fables of Aesop), the German critic Lessing, John Dryden, John Gay, and more recently George Orwell and James Thurber.

The structure of fables is relatively simple. The action is usually centered around a single incident intended to point out a moral. The plot contains either a single character whose actions illustrate some abstract principle of behavior or it contains two characters, one wise, one foolish, whose conflict results in the defeat of one and the victory of the other.

The theme, a direct outgrowth of the plot, is dramatized directly in the story itself, and it is often stated explicitly as a kind of thesis (in the form of a proverbial expression) at the end of the fable as well. Some typical themes found in fables are: the weak but clever individual winning over the strong, the futility of trying to appease the ruthless, the danger of yielding to flattery, the folly of sacrificing

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a sure thing for a larger gain, the irony of setting a trap for another and falling into it yourself. Like proverbs, fables deal with some of the most basic principles of human nature.

The characters in fables are generally types: the crafty fox, the haughty peacock, the resourceful fox, the gullible crow, the headstrong donkey. They are meant to represent aspects of human nature:

> The lion stands for kingliness, the ass for obstinate stupidity, the wolf for greed and savagery towards the defenceless. In this way, the various sides of our nature can be seen to be at war with one another; the weak and the simple are the victims of the strong and cunning; pride goes before a fall, meddlers often come to harm; patience and skill triumph over life's difficulties. We read . . . Fables, not to discover these truths, nor just for the neatness and simplicity of the stories; we read them because, through our pleasure in the stories, we recognize the truths we have always known, but which we delight to meet again in novel form.[3]

The style of fables is simple, with few detailed descriptions of character or places and little figurative language. The diction consists of simple, everyday words with few images or sensory details. The narrative is simple and the action direct. Because of the simplicity of the stories, the action is not set in a particular time or place. The interest is in the central incident and the theme, not in setting or character.

PARAPHRASE

The first exercise that I would like to describe is the paraphrase. In this exercise, the student is asked to take a simple fable and retell it either in a condensed or an extended form:

Original

A thirsty crow was looking for water and came upon a water pitcher. The water was at the bottom of the pitcher. The crow couldn't reach the bottom so he tried to break the pitcher, but he couldn't. Then he devised a plan. He picked up some pebbles and dropped them into the water. The water came up to the top and he satisfied his thirst. *Necessity is the mother of invention.* ("The Crow and the Pitcher")

Paraphrase

A crow that was dying of thirst looked around for some water. Finally, he found a pitcher with some water at the bottom. However, he could not reach it with his beak. He tried to break it but to no avail. Suddenly, he hit upon a plan. Picking up some small stones and dropping them into the pitcher, he raised the water level so that it nearly overflowed. Then he quenched his thirst and thought to himself, *Necessity is the mother of invention.*

DIRECT DISCOURSE

The second exercise consists in having students rewrite a fable, adding dialogue, so that the indirect discourse is changed to direct discourse:

Indirect Discourse

A dog was crossing a stream with some meat in his mouth. He looked into the water and saw his own reflection in it. He thought the reflection was another dog with a larger piece of meat. So he snapped at the dog in the water. As he opened his mouth, the piece of meat fell into the water. He lost his meat and the meat he hoped to gain. *Greediness can cause one to lose everything.* ("The Dog and His Shadow")

Direct Discourse

One day a dog was crossing a stream with some meat in his mouth. As he looked into the water, he saw his reflection and said to himself: "That looks like a dog with a huge piece of meat in his mouth. I think I'll growl at him and chase him away. Then I'll have his meat and my meat too." But as he opened his mouth, his piece of meat fell into the water and he lost everything. "My," he thought, "*greediness can cause one to lose everything.*"

AMPLIFICATION

The first two exercises are very simple. The third exercise, however, is much more challenging. In this exercise, the student is requested to embellish the plain style of a fable by adding descriptive details and dialogue. This exercise is intended to develop the student's imagination and to expand his or her stylistic resources.

The student model reprinted below is an amplification of the fable, *The Crow and the Pitcher,* previously cited:

Student Model

A crow was dying of thirst.

"I'll be a dirty bird if that sorry goose didn't tell me the farm was out here," he said, as he flapped over the green cactus and dry desert landscape. "I've been flying for the past thirty minutes and haven't seen so much as a second hand birdbath."

His eyes were bloodshot, and his tongue hung half out, and he was ragged, all of which made him look like a breathless, panting, bedraggled dog. With every flap of his wings, it looked as if he might quit and crash headlong into a cactus or some other spiney desert plant.

"I should have stayed back in the city," he thought, "instead of going on this wild goose chase."

For a moment he forgot his thirst and weariness, as he remembered the description of the farm. There was tall corn growing, and irrigation. Best of all, though, was the huge birdbath and an equally wonderful birdfeeder, both of which stood in the big yard under the shade trees, surrounded by lush, green lawn.

Water!! The reflection startled him so much, that he practically crashed into a cactus. He made a fast circle to see what it was. He had seen no brooks or ponds, but here, all of a sudden, he saw the flash of sun rays reflecting off of water. There it was, sure enough, a pitcher with water in the bottom of it, standing beside a small dirt and stick hut.

Down he swooped, with happy exclamations, "I'll slurp it and burp it! I'll rain it down on my head and shake it and splash it!!"

The farm was all but forgotten. He lighted on the brim of the pitcher, and reached for the water.

"Well, jerk my feathers out if this isn't the deepest pitcher I've ever seen!!" He bent over, his neck and body reaching downward in a diagonal slant toward the water, but stretch as he might, he could not get his parched beak into the water.

"It doesn't matter," he squawed, "I'll fix it good with a couple of hard pecks. When it breaks, I'll catch up the water before it's lost."

With this, he hopped down and began pecking. Easily at first, but soon with all his might, he hammered his beak into the hard clay, but he only succeeded in making a few dents, and he ended up with a very sore beak.

"Well," said he, "I'll break it with stones then." He hopped over to the edge of the clearing, to a pile of stones. "This one's a regular boulder," he said, as he looked the pile over. "I'll

smash that thing to dust. Here's one that ought to do it." He picked up the stone, and flying over the pitcher, he dropped it. It fell inside but didn't even dent the hard clay. He tried again and again, most of the stones falling inside the pitcher. After a time, he decided to rest.

"I believe I'm famished and must die on the spot," he croaked, coming to light once again on the pitcher. His sides were heaving, and his tongue was so swollen, he could hardly squeak. To his surprise, he looked down, and saw that the water level had risen within reach. Without a word, he stretched down and began to drink.

When he could hold no more, he stopped, and hopping down, made his way into the shade of the hut. Resting, he began to meditate on his profound experience. *"Necessity,"* he thought, *"is the mother of invention."*

This student paper displays wit and imagination. It is characterized by the invention of narrative details, a good choice of descriptive details, an interesting and humorous use of clichés, and a clever use of dialogue.

CREATION OF FABLES

The fourth exercise is the creation of original fables. Naturally you would want to have students study the characteristics of fables closely before writing fables of their own. In having students create fables, one possibility is to have them take a familiar proverb and use it as the basis of the story. In addition to the story line, they would also have to invent the characters and the dialogue. Another possibility is to have them write a fable, providing their own moral tag at the end. One ingenious student wrote a fable that contained three morals:

Inspiration for the Unhappy

Once upon a time, there was a little sparrow who hated to fly south for the winter. He dreaded the thought of leaving his home so much that he decided he would delay the journey until the last possible minute. After bidding a fond farewell to all his sparrow friends, he went back to his nest and stayed for an additional four weeks. Finally the weather turned so bitterly cold that he could delay no longer. As the little sparrow took off and started to fly south, it began to rain. In a short time, ice began to form on his little wings. Almost dead from cold and exhaustion, he fell to earth in a barnyard. As he was breathing what he thought was his last breath, a horse walked out of the barn and proceeded to cover the little bird with excrement. At first the sparrow could think of nothing except that this was a terrible way to die. But as the excrement started to sink into his feathers, it warmed him and life began to return to his body. He also found that he had enough room to breathe. Suddenly the little sparrow was so happy that he started to sing. At that moment a large cat came into the barnyard and, hearing the chirping of the little bird, began digging into the pile of excrement to find out where the sound was coming from. The cat finally uncovered the bird and ate him.

Now, this story contains *three* morals:

(1) Not everyone who craps on you is your enemy.
(2) Not everyone who takes crap off of you is your friend.
(3) When you are warm and comfortable, even if it is in a pile of crap, *KEEP YOUR MOUTH SHUT!*

Another wrote a fable, on a contemporary theme, using real people:

The Commune

A teenage Girl, living at home, was getting tired of listening to her parents nag her all the time to comb her hair, clean her room, and get good grades.

Across the valley from her house was a commune. Everyday when she got tired of listening to her Mother, she would sit outside, look over at the commune, and dream about living there. She kept saying to herself "Oh, if I could only live there. I could do whatever I pleased all the time."

One night at dinner, when her Mother said, "Sit up straight! Why do you always slump over the table?", the Girl decided she had had enough. She packed her bags and walked to the commune.

When she reached the commune, everyone welcomed her (they were always glad to have another worker), and they all sat around a fire, talking and drinking wine. When the Girl went to bed that night, she said to herself, "I knew this was the life for me."

The next morning a bell woke her up at five-thirty and someone shouted, "Time to get up and out to the fields." She was surprised, but got up because she didn't want to miss any of the fun. When she got to the field and a man handed her a hoe, she was shocked, but went to work.

After a couple of hours, her back was aching. She was hot, and she was tired. She paused for a moment and looked across the valley at her home. It was then, that she recalled her Father saying *"The grass always seems greener on the other side,"* and now she knew exactly what he had meant.

THE FABLE AS EXPOSITION

The fifth exercise consists in getting students to understand that their knowledge of and ability to use the fable form can help them in their expository writing. One of the most obvious characteristics of the fable is its didactism. Because fables are concerned with abstract ideas dramatized in the story and made explicit in the moral tag at the end, it is apparent that some fables have a kind of structure very similar to the thesis and support structure of expository prose. The proverb or moral tag corresponds to the thesis, and the narrative corresponds to the support of the thesis. The narrative thus serves as an *exemplum* or example of a moral thesis. Students already know that one way of supporting a generalization in expository prose is by adding an example in the form of a story. The Greeks used fables in just this way, to make a point or to support an argument.

With just a slight reordering of details, students can take just about any fable and cast it is expository form so that it serves an obvious paradigmatic function, as an example of a general thesis, usually as an example of the follies of human behavior:

The Wind and the Sun

The idea that *persuasion is often stronger than force* is supported by a very old fable whose application is still valid today.

The Wind and the Sun had an argument one day over which was the stronger. But neither could convince the other by words alone. So they decided to put their strength to the test. Looking down on the earth, they saw a traveler walking along the road. "Let's see," they said, "which of us can make the traveler take off his coat. So the Wind blew fiercely and forcefully with his cold breath, but the harder he blew, the more the traveler drew his coat around him. Then the Sun began to shine bright. It got warm, then a little warmer, until the man took off his coat.

This story exemplifies the idea that persuasion can often accomplish what force cannot.

The point of this exercise is not merely to have students turn one mode of discourse into another, but also to prepare the way for their incorporating fables and other kinds of stories into expository or argumentative prose, for quite often a narrative, because of its concreteness, will serve as better support for a generalization than a more abstract example would.

In this paper, I have barely touched upon the possibilities that fables can provide for the composition classroom. One final use of fables, however, remains to be cited. Because fables symbolize recurring patterns of experience that represent typical and therefore timeless situations, the human relationships described in these fables apply just as much to people today as they did in Aesop's time. For this reason, they are uniquely suitable to express general truths, precepts, and habits of conduct and therefore are an excellent vehicle for bridging the gap not only between expository writing and imaginative literature, but also between composition as a general skill and composition as a humanistic discipline. ■

FOOTNOTES

[1]Donald L. Clark, "The Rise and Fall of Progymnasmata in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century Grammar Schools," *Speech Monographs*, XIX (November, 1952), 260.

[2]My primary sources are: *Aesop Without Morals*, trans. and ed. by Lloyd W. Daly (New York and London: A. S. Barnes and Co., 1961); Donald L. Clark, *John Milton at St. Paul's School* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1948); Donald L. Clark, *Rhetoric in Greco-Roman Education* (Morningside Heights, N.Y.: Columbia University Press, 1957); Raymond E. Nadeau, *"The Progymnasmata of Aphthonius* in Translation," *Speech Monographs*, XIX (November, 1952), 264-285; Thomas Newbigging, *Fables and Fabulists: Ancient and Modern* (London: Elliot Stock, 1895).

[3]James Reeves, "Introduction" to *Fables from Aesop* (New York: Walck, 1962).

Assessing Students' Attitudes toward Writing

Barry M. Kroll

Virtually all teachers recognize that attitudes play a key role in learning. Students with high motivation and expectations of success tend to perform well in school. This relationship between positive attitudes and success seems to hold special relevance for the composition course, where student effort—both in terms of quantity and quality—is a prerequisite for growth. Positive attitudes lead to more willing writing, and it is only by practicing writing that one can learn to write well.

Despite the common-sense nature of this relationship between attitudes and success, there has until recently been little research on the specific effects of attitudes on writing. Moreover, in spite of a general acknowledgement that attitudes affect writing performance, most of our measures of growth in writing have been narrowly cognitive, assessing such areas as progress toward standard usage, improvement in writing mechanics, and development of syntactic versatility. We have been reluctant to consider improvement in attitude toward writing as a valid goal of composition instruction, perhaps because such affective goals often seem intangible. However, recent research suggests not only that attitudes influence writing performance, but also that a student's attitude toward writing is measurable. Attitude measures have proven useful both for basic research and for program evaluation.

Most of the important basic research on the effects of attitude toward writing has been conducted by John Daly and his associates. Daly and Miller defined a construct called "writing apprehension," hypothesizing that individuals high in apprehension would fear evaluation of their writing, would avoid writing situations if possible, and would feel anxiety when placed in a context that required writing. In the classroom apprehensive students would be ones who "consistently fail to turn in compositions, who do not attend class when writing is required, and who seldom enroll voluntarily in courses where writing is known to be demanded."[1] Daly and Miller developed a 26-item self-report questionnaire to measure writing apprehension. The authors demonstrate that the instrument has high reliability and also predictive validity: their studies show that writing apprehension is related both to the satisfaction that students get from course work requiring writing and to the expectations that students have about success in future writing-oriented courses. Students high in apprehension neither enjoy work which entails writing nor expect to do well on writing tasks. Such students tend not to enroll in advanced composition courses.

In subsequent studies using the questionnaire, Daly discovered that students high in writing apprehension tend to display poor abilities in writing: highly apprehensive students score lower on both quantitative and qualitative measures of writing than students with low apprehension. High apprehensives write fewer words, compose fewer sentences, and use less intense language and fewer qualifiers than low apprehensives.[2] Daly found that high apprehensives scored significantly lower on a comprehensive test of writing mechanics and grammar,[3] and that trained raters judged papers from high apprehensives significantly lower in overall quality than papers from low apprehensives.[4]

Daly and Shamo discovered that highly apprehensive students tend to make choices of major and occupation that are consistent with their attitudes toward writing. Students high in apprehension choose college majors that they perceive as low in writing demands (e.g., physical education, mathematics, computer science) rather than majors that are high in writing demands (e.g., English, communication, philosophy, history).[5] Similarily, individuals high in writing apprehension find those occupations that demand little writing significantly more desirable than occupations with high writing demands.[6]

These empirical studies are important, but the results are not, I suspect, surprising to most English teachers. We know from experience that a portion of our students dislike and even fear writing. Diederich characterizes the attitude of his remedial students: "They hate and fear writing more than anything else they have had to do in school. If they see a blank sheet of paper on which they are expected to write something, they look as though they want to scream."[7] Students with such attitudes tend to write poorly and many show little

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improvement with traditional instruction in writing.

Recently, Charles Cooper has emphasized the importance of attitudes, proposing that growth of a favorable attitude toward writing should be a major goal of a composition program, and that attitudinal change should be measured.[8] There are, of course, informal ways to assess improvement in students' attitudes toward writing. If a student begins producing more writing or begins to attempt writing tasks that he or she previously avoided, this is clear evidence of attitudinal change. But Cooper recommends using a more formal assessment instrument—a Likert-type attitude measure similar to the one developed by Daly and Miller.

To test his recommendations, I followed closely Cooper's suggestions in designing my own version of an attitude measure. I administered the measure twice to four classes of freshman composition. The instrument contained 25 statements about writing; thirteen of the statements were positive and twelve were negative. I constructed statements that seemed relevant for university freshmen: the statements focused on preparedness for college writing, expectations of success with written tasks, eagerness to engage in composing, and values placed on good writing. The statements were printed in random order. The last five statements are listed below as a sample of the items on the instrument.

- ☐ I look forward to the written work that will be assigned in college.
- ☐ I find it hard to express myself in writing.
- ☐ Writing a paper is a challenging but enjoyable task.
- ☐ I feel that my writing skills are adequate for success in college courses.
- ☐ The ability to write well is largely inherited; there is not much one can do to improve.

Students were asked to respond on a seven-point scale, from "agree very strongly" (7) to "disagree very strongly" (1). Scoring was reversed on negatively worded items so that a high score represented a positive attitude toward writing.

To encourage honesty of response, I also followed Cooper's suggestion that students use a private code number as an identification, rather than their names. For reference at the end of the term, one student kept a list of names and code numbers, but students were assured that the teacher would never see this list.

The first administration of the attitude instrument was on the third class meeting of the term. The students were freshmen enrolled in writing courses at Iowa State University: I tested three sections of a regular freshman writing course and one section of a remedial course. There was no special treatment designed to improve attitudes about writing; classes followed a traditional program in composition. The final administration of the instrument took place during the last class meeting, two-and-a-half months after the first administration. A total of 65 students responded on both administrations of the measure. As a group, these students showed a significant gain in mean scores, $t(64) = 4.35$, $p < .001$. Although all sections showed an increase in mean scores on the attitude measure, for only two sections did the difference in means reach statistical significance: Class 3, $t(13) = 2.66$, $p < .05$; Class 4, $t(17) = 2.99$, $p < .01$. The table shows the scores and percent gain for each class.

The gains made by these students seem rather encouraging given the short duration of the classes. Of course without a control group (freshman who took no writing course during the period), it is not possible to attribute this improvement solely to the composition classes. What is evident is that, as Cooper has suggested, a teacher-made attitude measure can reflect a positive or negative shift in attitude toward writing. Moreover, a locally-designed instrument can be tailored to specific factors affecting students' attitudes. For example, the attitude instrument I used had a number of items pertaining to fears typical of college freshmen: anxiety about lack of preparation and feelings of insecurity when confronted with college writing tasks. This type of small-scale but careful check on changes in students' attitudes gives teachers some indication of how a writing course is influencing their students affectively. Thus it seems a useful supplement to more cognitively-oriented measures of growth in writing.

Attitude measures can also help in identifying those students whose attitudes toward writing are negative. Laque and Sherwood give examples of attitude inventories that can be used as diagnostic instruments.[9] The authors suggest that such inventories can help students clarify their attitudes: students could talk openly about their attitudes toward writing, expressing negtive feelings and discussing avenues for change. Thus, attitude instruments offer a way to objectify and externalize students' attitudes.

Mean Scores on Writing Attitude Instrument

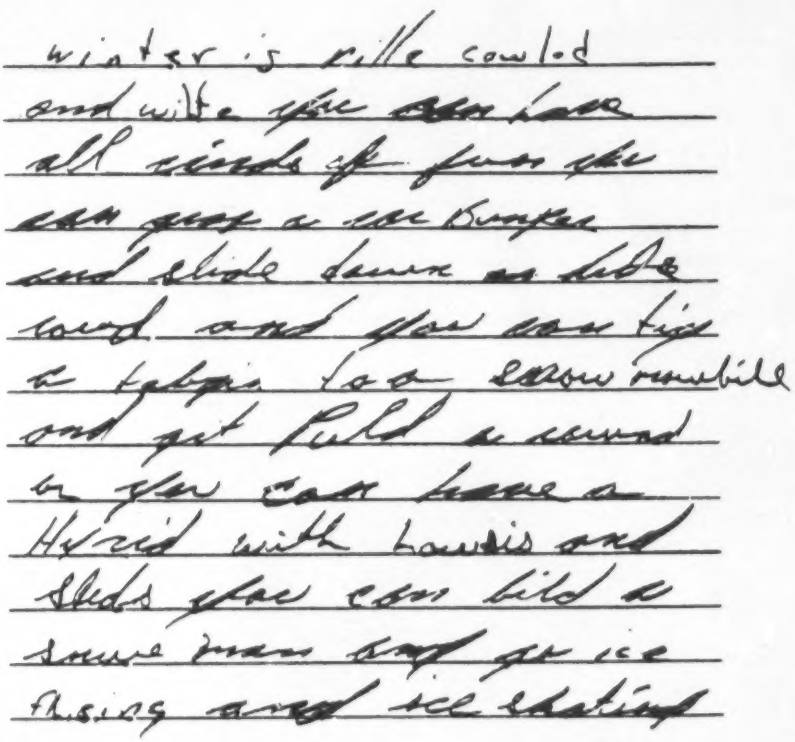
Class	Pre-Course Score	Post-Course Score	% Gain
1 Freshman Comp ($n = 14$)	112.14	118.50	5.7
2 Freshman Comp ($n = 19$)	112.37	115.84	3.1
3 Freshman Comp ($n = 14$)	116.50	127.79*	9.7
4 Remedial Comp ($n = 18$)	110.00	117.39**	6.7

*$p < .05$
**$p < .01$

Clearly, the sources of negative attitudes toward writing are complex, interlocked like links in a chain: apprehension of evaluation leads to avoidance of writing, which results in lack of writing practice, which leads to unskilled performance, which results in negative criticism, which leads to apprehension . . . . It is difficult to know what the first link in the chain is, or where and how to break the circle.[10] Nevertheless, our ultimate goal must be to understand the causes and cures of extremely negative attitudes toward writing.

There are two familiar strategies for aiding students who fail at writing and hence dislike composing. One strategy focuses on the specific skills that these students lack, basing its pedagogy on the belief that only when writers control the mechanics of written expression can they achieve the fluency that is a prerequisite for enjoying composing. The other strategy focuses on the weak writer's lack of self-esteem, basing its pedagogy on the belief that success breeds success and hence that teachers should emphasize the best aspects of students' papers, ignoring mechanical faults. Paradoxically, both strategies are right—and both are wrong. The problem is that advocates of these strategies tend to take their positions to an extreme, seeking an oversimplified solution. Certainly weak writers need to improve their skills (handwriting, spelling, usage), but all too often an emphasis on "basic skills" means drill on nit-picking points of usage and a focus on error-marking, tossing students about on a sea of limitless writing problems, convincing them that they will never successfully navigate the complex waters of written English. Clearly, weak writers need to receive praise when they produce successful discourse, regardless of their errors; but too often this strategy results in an excess of gushy praise and a neglect of the writer's inadequacies, perhaps in the naive belief that errors will disappear if ignored. Exclusive reliance on either strategy is probably going to be ineffective for the writer with weak writing skills and a negative attitude toward writing.

Several years ago I worked in a tutorial center for children with serious reading and writing difficulties. My most memorable case was a tenth-grade boy, Charles, who read at the second-grade level and hated to read or write. He was coaxed into coming to special sessions only because he couldn't read well enough to obtain a license for driving his motorcycle. Below is a section of a composition written after a few weeks of tutorial work.


winter is rile cowld
and wite you can have
all kinds of fun you
can grab a car bumper
and slide down and slide
round and you can tie
a tobgin to a snowmobile
and get pulld around
or you can have a
Hayrid with horsis and
sleds you can bild a
snow man and go ice
fising and ice skating

Now here is the entire composition, printed with standardized spelling and punctuation.

> Winter is real cold and white. You can have all kinds of fun. You can grab a car bumper and slide down and slide around. You can tie a toboggan to a snowmobile and get pulled around, or you can give a hay ride with horses and sleds. You can build a snow man and go ice fishing and ice skating too. You can build an igloo too. But I think the most fun is to come in from skiing with someone you really like, and drink hot cocoa, and listen to soft music, and make the fire in the fireplace.

The original, handwritten selection demonstrates that Charles' "basic" writing skills are weak—his spellings, while phonetic, are often far from standard, and his handwriting is quite difficult to decipher. Writing is obviously painful for Charles; he takes little pleasure in putting words on paper. In fact Charles seemed embarrassed when asked to look over his writing, probably because his handwriting appears childish, belying his physical and intellectual maturity. Mina Shaughnessy wisely comments that such handwriting is "an indication that the writer is not at home with this skill, that he is hindered not only by the difficulties of articulation that confront most writers but also by his stiffness with the pen. The answer to this is practice . . . until the pen seems a natural extension of the hand, and the hand of the mind itself."[11]

The standardized composition reveals that, in spite of numerous errors, Charles can produce success-

ful discourse—the content and structure of the composition are more mature than the surface features indicate. And yet Charles had rarely been praised for a piece of writing. Instead, he had been criticized and repeatedly failed, made almost mute as a writer.

Charles' distaste for writing was extreme, a clear case of writing apprehension. However, when Charles realized that someone could appreciate and find meaning in his writing he began to write less grudgingly. And when he learned more correct spellings and improved his handwriting, he began to compose more fluently. Thus, the two strategies seemed to interact, encouraging more growth in confidence and control than either would have produced alone. This combination of strategies—working to reduce mechanical obstacles to writing fluency while also striving to acknowledge sincere, successful discourse—seems essential for helping students' overcome their negative attitudes toward writing. Ideally, much of the work on students' errors should be individualized, with the teacher identifying each students' salient writing errors, analyzing the underlying causes of these errors, and then providing specific instruction.[12] Successful writing should be acknowledged by providing an appreciative audience for compositions. Often peers can become such an audience and school newspapers or magazines are a familiar way to create a wider readership for student writing.[13] In the case of writers with very weak skills, a composition should probably be standardized and typed prior to distribution in order to avoid feelings of embarrassment.

As we know both from research and our own teaching experiences, students' attitudes are particularly important for learning to write. Those who hate, fear, and thus avoid writing are going to make slow progress, at best, in learning to compose. If attitudes are crucial, then we need to give increased attention to assessment of them in order to identify those students who have negative feelings about writing, as well as to judge the impact of our composition programs on students' attitudes. Clearly, there is no panacea for changing negative attitudes, and simplistic solutions should be viewed suspiciously. Long-term change seems most likely to result from a sensitive integration of two strategies—acknowledging successes and dealing forthrightly with a limited number of errors. Although often viewed as contradictory, the two strategies should be seen as complementary. Both appear to be necessary to break the chain of writing apprehension, freeing students to achieve competence in writing and to develop a positive attitude toward composing.■

NOTES

[1]John A. Daly and Michael D. Miller, "The Empirical Development of an Instrument to Measure Writing Apprehension," *Research in the Teaching of English*, 9 (1975), 244.

[2]John A. Daly and Michael D. Miller, "Apprehension of Writing as a Predictor of Message Intensity," *The Journal of Psychology*, 89 (1975), 175-177; John A. Daly, "The Effects of Writing Apprehension on Message Encoding," *Journalism Quarterly*, 54 (1977), 566-572.

[3]John A. Daly, "Writing Apprehension and Writing Competency." Paper presented at the annual convention of the Southwest Educational Research Association, Austin, Texas, January 1978. Available from the author.

[4]Daly, "Effects of Writing Apprehension," pp. 570-571.

[5]John A. Daly and Wayne Shamo, "Academic Decisions as a Function of Writing Apprehension," *Research in the Teaching of English*, 12 (1978), 119-126.

[6]John A. Daly and Wayne Shamo, "Writing Apprehension and Occupational Choice," *Journal of Occupational Psychology*, 49 (1976), 55-56.

[7]Paul B. Diederich, *Measuring Growth in English* (Urbana, Ill.: NCTE, 1974), p. 21.

[8]Charles Cooper, "Measuring Growth in Writing," *English Journal*, 64 (1975), 116.

[9]Carol Feiser Laque and Phyllis A. Sherwood, *A Laboratory Approach to Writing* (Urbana, Ill.: NCTE, 1977), pp. 48-51.

[10]John A. Daly, "Writing Apprehension in the Classroom: Teacher Role Expectancies of the Apprehensive Writer." Paper presented at the annual convention of the International Communication Association, Chicago, April 1978. Available from the author.

[11]Mina P. Shaughnessy, *Errors and Expectations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 16.

[12]See Barry M. Kroll and John C. Schafer, "Error Analysis and the Teaching of Composition," *College Composition and Communication*, 29 (1978), 242-248.

[13]Emily Strong, "Give Them a Reason to Write: Launching the Informal School Newspaper," *English Journal*, 66 (May 1977), 36-40.

CALL FOR PAPERS

The New York College English Association announces its fall meeting, October 12-13, 1979 at St. Bonaventure University. The theme for the meeting is "The Writer and His Audience," and the association invites papers of 12-15 pages on that topic. Papers, with 250 word abstracts, should be sent to John Mulryan, NYCEA Fall Conference, Box 3C, St. Bonaventure University, St. Bonaventure, N.Y. 14778, by June 15.

Teachers Teaching Teachers

THE WESTERN NEW YORK WRITING PROJECT

Ann Matsuhashi
Dawn Ryan

If you are a high school or junior high school English teacher, the following situations may sound familiar to you:

- A tenth grade teacher at Hamburg Central High School develops a technique for teaching her students how to avoid monotonous sentence structure. It works. She tells one colleague about it quickly, over lunch. Her tired colleague is preoccupied with the day's problems. Only the first teacher's students have a chance to practice this new approach.
- After struggling for years with teaching the research paper, an eleventh grade Grand Island teacher refines his programmed approach, allowing his students to experience success at each stage of the process. Because of their busy schedules the other eleventh grade teachers continue struggling with teaching the research paper.
- An eighth grade teacher at West Seneca Junior High works diligently to establish a one-to-one conferencing program for her student writers. After months of trial and error she has worked out efficient, successful procedures. More important, she has seen her students' writing improve as a result of her efforts. Ten miles away at Frontier Junior High, a teacher scans an *English Record* article describing positive results from a one-to-one conferencing program. He decides it can't be done in his school.

If any of the above teachers had had an opportunity, away from the immediate demands of a work day, to share successful techniques for teaching writing with colleagues, many more students would have had the opportunity to improve their writing skills. This past summer, twenty-six Western New York English teachers, participants in the Western New York Writing Project, did have the opportunity to share what they had learned about teaching writing. What they learned and how they learned it have implications for the future of composition teaching.

The Western New York Writing Project, one of several in New York State (others are located at State University of New York at Albany, Putman/Northern Westchester BOCES and Pace University, and at Herbert H. Lehman College), is part of a national network of similar projects. Sponsored locally by the English Education Division at the State University of New York at Buffalo, BOCES II, and several local school districts, the Western New York Writing Project is modeled after the San Francisco Bay Area Writing Project, the forerunner of this nationwide teacher-training program.

The goal of the Western New York Writing Project (WNYWP), as well as that of each of the other thirty-nine national writing projects, is to improve student writing. And in order to improve student writing, the WNYWP invites English teachers who have specialized in teaching writing to share successful techniques, to engage in personal writing, to review current theory and research on writing, and finally to visit other school districts as consultants, sharing what they have learned. Mentioned in *Newsweek's* "Why Johnny Can't Write" as a possible solution to the "writing crisis," and recognized by the National Endowment for the Humanities as a useful teacher-training project, the WNYWP is a highly visible expression of our commitment to improving our students' writing.

In this article we describe the National Writing Project—its development, its format, and its concerns—in order to provide some perspective for our discussion of the Western New York Writing Project. We will discuss in detail the WNYWP's day-to-day format, including statements by the participants telling what they learned through their participation in the project.

The National Writing Project

The Western New York Writing Project has only completed its first summer invitational program, but this type of teacher-training/curriculum development project has been in existence for five years in the San Francisco area. Originally called the Bay Area Writing Project, this project grew out of three years of planning and discussion by James Gray of the Teacher Education Department of U. C. Berkeley and other educators in California.

The Bay Area Writing Project's first summer invitational program in 1974 generated positive, practical solutions to the problem of students' declining writing skills. The project was a success. Not only did the teacher-participants think so, but so did the local school districts, as well as the University at Berkeley, which agreed to fund the program locally for another five years. The Bay Area

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Writing Project's effect on student writing is presently being evaluated by Michael Scriven of the Carnegie Corporation.

1978 was the first year for a national network of summer invitational writing projects. These projects, located at university centers, were funded by local school districts, businesses, and universities with matching funds provided by the National Endowment for the Humanities.

The goal of the National Writing Project—to improve student writing—is achieved through summer inservice training of English teachers and through the development of teacher-consultants. The participant-centered format for the summer invitational projects includes teacher demonstrations of successful classroom teaching techniques; writing workshops, during which the teacher-participants respond to each other's writing; presentations by invited guest speakers; and discussions of readings on current teaching practices as well as recent research and theory on the process of composing in writing. Finally, these teacher-participants, sharpening and focusing their teaching expertise developed in the classroom, prepare to share what they know about the teaching of writing by consulting with other teachers through inservice programs provided by local schools and districts.

While the format of the National Writing Project's summer workshops for teachers offers a common-sense solution to retraining teachers and has some support in a general way from educational research as well as from previous teacher-training projects, it is a newcomer, a unique concept in teacher training and curriculum development. The format for the National Writing Project and its emphasis on teachers teaching each other developed out of the following four concerns:[1]

- *Most English teachers were originally trained to teach literature, not composition.* Some of these teachers, however, have developed successful techniques for teaching writing in the isolation of their classrooms. The National Writing Project attempts to bring these teachers together to share what they have learned. It is also important to note that while new teachers need to be trained to teach writing, the demand for new English teachers has declined, making it imperative to retrain those English teachers currently in the field.
- *Curriculum change cannot be accomplished only by consultants who visit a school district once, make recommendations, and are never seen again.* The "writing crisis" is a problem to be shared by both the university and school districts. The school district has traditionally relied solely on outside consultants, often from university education departments; however, changes in curriculum suggested by a team—university faculty working with knowledgeable teachers, meeting regularly over a period of time—can precipitate needed changes in particular schools or school districts.
- *Recent research and theory on the process of composing in writing offers suggestions for revising many current teaching practices.* Teachers who attend the summer invitational programs of the National Writing Project do more than share successful teaching practices. They read widely, attempting to find support for teaching practices in research in the fields of rhetoric, linguistics, psychology and child language acquisition. The teacher-participants prepare bibliographies of useful readings and materials to disseminate to still other teachers, and project participants meet with invited guest speakers to discuss recent research and curriculum development work.
- *Classroom-centered research by teachers could make a significant contribution to our knowledge of the writing process and of the best ways to teach writing.* In an article entitled "Doing Research/Reading Research," Charles R. Cooper asserts, "Every alert, conscientious teacher is unavoidably an empiricist, a researcher."[2] During the National Writing Project's summer invitational programs teachers are encouraged to formulate questions, record their observations systematically, generalize about their conclusions, and, finally, report their findings to other teachers.

The National Writing Project summer inservice programs involve approximately twenty day-long sessions of learning by doing: teaching, writing, reading, discussing, and sharing, activities which spark a renewed interest in the teaching of writing. Locally, the Western New York Writing Project has just finished its first summer invitational program; its participants have returned to their classroom and are consulting with area school districts. In the next section, we describe the day-to-day format of the Western New York Writing Project, reporting on the happenings of its first summer invitational program.

The Western New York Writing Project

The Western New York branch of the National Writing Project brought together a group of 26 English teachers from twelve school districts who had a special interest in teaching writing. The group met four days a week, for five weeks, from 9:30 a.m. until 3:30 p.m. Modeled after the original Bay Area Writing Project, the WNYWP summer program included five components:

Summer Invitational Program

1. *Teacher Demonstrations:* Teachers present actual class lessons, and the rest of the group role-play the part of the students and participate in the lesson.
2. *Writing Workshops:* Teachers engage in extensive personal writing and meet with a small group to read their drafts and discuss possibilities for revisions.
3. *Guest Speakers:* Invited speakers present their research and discuss it with project participants.
4. *Reading:* Project participants read widely, discuss the implications of the readings for instruction, and develop bibliographies.
5. *Consulting:* During the school year, project participants take part in district inservice programs, sharing their skills with other English teachers.

Teacher Demonstrations

During each morning session, from 9:30 a.m. until 12:30 p.m., two teacher-participants demonstrated techniques for teaching writing, presentations as varied as the participants' teaching situations. During the presentations the teachers in the audience acted as students, actually completing the assigned writing tasks. Teachers asked questions, however, in a dual role: as students in a classroom and as teachers assessing the feasibility of an approach for their particular classroom situations.

These presentations have two purposes: first, through them teachers share what they have learned about teaching writing; second, the presentations function as trial-runs

for later consultant presentations to other groups of teachers.

The following list includes a sampling of the topics presented by the teacher-participants:

- Establishing Whole-Class Response-Circles for Writing
- Using Values-Clarification to Encourage Writing
- Senior Composition—Emphasis on Revision
- Training Students for Peer-Response to Writing
- Basic Writers—Writing Survival Techniques
- Publishing Your Own Writing and Your Students' Writing
- Establishing a Writing Place at Your School
- Diagnosing and Solving Punctuation/Sentence Problems
- Teaching Students to Use Transitions in Expository Writing
- Using Dramatic Improvisation as a Pre-Writing Technique

Writing Workshops

An irony often noted by English teachers is that they rarely take time to write. For this reason, teacher- participants met in small groups of about five or six, two afternoons a week, to respond to one another's writing.

Throughout the summer project, teachers worked on three writing assignments drawn from James Moffett's sequential writing program, all of them assignments we might ask our students to do. The assignments centered around a single event in the author's life. In the first assignment, and autobiographical incident, the writer focused on him or her self, using "I" and wrote to a somewhat distant, adult audience—perhaps readers of a personal experience magazine. In the next assignment, a biographical incident, the writer shifted the focus, using "he," to another character and re-constructed the same, original incident. In the third assignment, generalization about the same incident, the writer shifted to a topic-centered point-of-view and wrote a typical expository theme about how people behave in a particular situation.

Typically, a group session begins with one author reading his or her draft. The rest of the group listen carefully and respond with positive comments, indicating strengths in the prose, or with questions, asking, "What did you mean here?" or "Tell me more about this?" or "Why did that person do thus and such?" The author then revises the draft and brings it back.

Near the end of the five-week session, using a project feedback sheet, many of the participants wrote that these writing workshops had taught them more about the experience of writing than they had thought possible. In fact, some of the writing groups have planned to continue to meet after the workshop ends to allow the participants to continue sharing.

Guest Speakers

Each week during the summer invitational program guest speakers visited the project and shared their work with the project participants. The speakers might be university faculty or classroom teachers. This past summer, Jean Jensen, a teacher-consultant from the first Bay Area Writing Project, visited Buffalo to speak about the National Writing Project and about writing projects in other cities around the country. In addition the following speakers visited the 1978 WNYWP: Charles Cooper, State University of New York at Buffalo; Terence P. Mosher, State College at Fredonia; Robert Blake, State College at Brockport; and Lee Odell, University at Albany.

Cooper, in a talk entitled "What Research Can Tell Us About the Teaching of Writing,"[4] summarized the results of fifteen years of curriculum research, describing the elements of a good writing program. We reproduce the list here because it is a useful summary of the groups' conclusions after attending the Western New York Writing Project's summer project. While the list offers nothing startlingly new, it does provide confirmation that we should continue to revise our day-to-day plans as well as our writing curriculum to place more emphasis on writing.

Elements of a Good Writing Program

1. Students write often.
2. Students get a great deal of immediate response to their writing from the teacher and from other students, response at the discourse level as well as the sentence level.
3. Students write in many modes abstracting information and experience at different levels and writing for varied audiences.
4. Students learn and use several pre-writing or discovery procedures.
5. Students occasionally revise or reformulate a piece of writing.
6. Mistakes are treated as a chance to improve, not as an occasion for punishment; mistakes are dealt with by the teacher and other students as they occur in each student's writing.
7. Students with particularly acute usage or mechanics problems get a chance to practice correct forms in programmed, self-help materials, with such practice carefully monitored by the teacher.
8. Students practice written and oral sentence combining, either in a print or game format.
9. Student writing is occasionally published in some inexpensive form within the class or school.
10. Students read large amounts of published writing of the same kinds they are writing.

Reading

Books by James Moffett, Peter Elbow, and Mina Shaughnessy and a collection of essays edited by Charles R. Cooper and Lee Odell were used by the project participants to develop a sound theoretical base for teaching practices as well as to design and revise writing curricula.

James Moffett, in *Teaching the Universe of Discourse*, has developed a useful description of the modes of discourse. This discourse scheme, from which he has developed his K-13 language arts curriculum, specifies a sequence of increasingly complex writing tasks. A relatively simple task might require that a beginning writer compose in his or her own voice on a familiar subject—perhaps, "How I Lost My Pet Goldfish"—to an intimate audience, such as a close friend. A more complex task might require that the writer adopt an authoritative voice and generalize

how people behave during a natural disaster, addressing a distant, perhaps absent audience of newspaper readers.

Peter Elbow's *Writing Without Teachers* can guide teachers as well as students—anyone who needs help conceptualizing and producing a piece of writing. He offers an insightful description of the composing process; advice for how to begin a short college paper, proceeding through the drafting and revision to the completion. He suggests ways for writers to respond to one another's work, through "pointing" and "summarizing" activities. The Writing Workshops in the WNYWP used Elbow's techniques for responding to writing.

Mina Shaughnessy's *Errors and Expectations* contains a detailed description of the errors found in the writing of basic college writers, those who are just beginning to learn to compose successfully in writing. While Shaughnessy's suggestions for instruction are not as useful as they might be, her extensive lists of examples of student errors help us to learn what skills our students need to master to become practicing writers—to meet the writing demands of everyday life as well as those of their academic careers.

Evaluating Writing: Describing, Measuring, and Judging, edited by Charles R. Cooper and Lee Odell, provided the project participants with a collection of practical, theory-based approaches to evaluating student writing. From this collection of essays WNYWP participants learned about ways to describe and measure students' growth in writing, how to diagnose a particular student's difficulty in order to plan instruction, and how to train students in peer evaluation techniques.

School-Year Consulting Activities

During the school year, participants of the WNYWP are available to consult with teachers in various school districts either on a short-term basis, demonstrating specific teaching techniques, or on a long-term basis, working with other teachers, administrators and university consultants to devise curriculum changes or evaluation procedures. In addition, WNYWP consultants meet regularly on Saturdays throughout the year, sometimes with local school administrators to explain the program, but usually to discuss their current consulting activities and future plans.

The teacher demonstrations are often trial runs for later consulting activities. The Bay Area Writing Project has developed a list suggesting what makes a presentation effective.[5] In addition, workshop participants have found these guidelines useful in planning their consulting activities.

What Makes an Effective Presentation?

There is absolutely no formula for this, no "right way," but over the years the more effective presentations have tended to include some or all of the following:

1. Involving all the workshop participants in an activity—writing, responding to each other's writing, improvising, drawing, figuring out a puzzle, etc.
2. Using examples of student writing to illustrate the technique or approach you are demonstrating. Be sure to include a description of the context for the student writing—under which circumstances it was done, etc.
3. Showing students' writing before and after the specific technique you are demonstrating. This makes clear, as nothing else can, the specific effectiveness of the approach you are using.
4. Looking closely at specific problems certain students have with writing and describing what exactly to do about those problems.
5. Explaining how a given approach evolved out of years of teaching, reading, and thinking. Trace a little of this background for the participants; it will help them understand the rationale for your approach.

Try to avoid the following practices, which have generally been on a scale from unsuccessful to actually disastrous:

1. Explaining in prolonged detail the English department grading or assessment policies.
2. Explaining in prolonged detail the course of study in your particular school.
3. Describing, in prolonged detail, the history of your successes as a teacher of writing.
4. Explaining anything in *prolonged* detail.
5. Reading your presentation, or large parts of it.

What We Have Learned

On the first day of the WNYWP summer invitational program, the participants submitted a draft of a position paper detailing their beliefs about teaching writing. These first drafts were kept in a sealed envelope and were returned to the participants on the last day of the project to be compared with a second position paper on the same topic, written during the last week. Below, from those final position papers we have quoted what some project participants said about the teaching of writing:

> Writing should be the most humane thing that happens in a school. It surely is the most human of activities; one person sharing his vision of the world with another. It is for a moment opening the sealed door to our thoughts and letting another person gently, quietly peer in. It makes us vulnerable; it makes us human.
>
> **Denise David**
> **Tonawanda Middle School**
> **Tonawanda, New York**

> The most important change brought about by being part of the Western New York Writing Project this summer was the discovery that I can write; and the conviction that if the methods used here worked for me, they would work for students of all grade levels.
>
> **Mary Strout**
> **Sweethome High School**
> **Amherst, New York**

> I now believe that inservice training can help teachers find answers to how and where to begin to eradicate some of the writing problems their students have had.
>
> **Clarinda J. Mose**
> **Bennett High School**
> **Buffalo, New York**

> What a different me sits here today to write this final position paper. In fact, I've changed my thoughts about using the term final. Part of the change in me is discovering that there is no

(Please turn to Page 18)

Evaluating Writing

New Assumptions, New Procedures

Lee Odell

Of all the tasks confronting composition teachers, the chore of evaluating students' work has to be the most difficult, the least exciting, and the easiest to ignore, postpone, or slight. How different it is from planning and teaching a class in composition. When things go well, the planning and teaching process can be exhilarating. We begin with an inspiration, a hunch about some topic or composing task that promises to engage our students' minds and imaginations. When our inspiration proves sound, when the hunch works itself out into a really satisfying plan for a class session, everything seems possible. There's a chance that we may have helped students get at some of the energy that gives life and direction to their writing. There's a chance that students will write more profoundly, more eagerly, or just more.

Even if these occasions happen less often than we'd like, they are heady stuff, capable of sustaining us and our students until the next time. But evaluation...That's another matter. With evaluation, some of the excitement begins to wear off. We're no longer enraptured with grand visions of what our students' writing may become. Now we are confronted with what their writing actually is. And that actuality can be disconcerting. Perhaps our activities and goals were not nearly so clear and stimulating as we had thought. Students may have missed the point, may not have written as well or as much as we'd anticipated. Or it may be that students are succeeding in ways we hadn't expected or can't even describe very well. Their writing has strengths that we wouldn't have predicted, strengths that don't fit neatly into our pre-established critical categories. It's also quite possible that things have not gone as well as some students had hoped; when we return papers we may anticipate that some students honestly will not understand why we graded their work as we did. Moreover, it's almost certain that we encounter all these difficulties under the worst possible circumstances—late at night, after we've gone on to planning new work and are feeling slightly guilty about not having returned papers much sooner.

These difficulties—surely all of us have felt them—are not easy to avoid. Any time we evaluate, there's a good chance we'll find that we and/or our students have not accomplished all we had hoped, that some writing is difficult to assess, that some students do not share our opinions. Fortunately, these problems can be solved or at least minimized, and solutions will be our main concern here. But in order to think usefully about solutions, we'll have to abandon some widely-held but self-defeating assumptions about the evaluation of writing. We'll need to begin by agreeing about what it is and what it is not.

1. *"Evaluation" is not a synonym for "grading".* Indeed, assigning grades to students' papers is, at most, only the last stage of a complex process that begins not when students turn in their papers but when we formulate a writing assignment.
2. *Evaluation is not some mysterious activity that only teachers can engage in.* Quite the contrary: effective evaluation requires that we devise explicit, reasonable criteria which our students can apply to their own and their classmates' writing.
3. *Evaluation is not simply a matter of praising or finding fault.* We must, finally, make some sort of value judgment about students' work. But we must do so *only* after we have described their writing accurately, fairly, nonjudgmentally.
4. *Evaluation is not necessarily retrospective.* There are times—at the end of a unit of study, a semester, a year—when we want a summing up, a final statement about what students have accomplished. But it's even more important that evaluation be future-oriented; it must help students see what they might do to improve their work on subsequent writing tasks.
5. *Evaluation is not restricted to certain kinds of writing.* Many of us now encourage students to write journals, advertisements, lyrics, and dialogues as well as expository/argumentative themes. When we evaluate students' writing ability, we must consider students' success with the former types of writing as well as students' performance on the latter, more traditional writing tasks.

If we accept these assumptions about what evaluation is and is not, we may have to make substantial changes in the way we go about evaluating students' writing. In the remainder of this paper, I'll describe these changes and suggest how these changes help solve recurrent problems I mentioned earlier.

New Procedures for Assigning and Evaluating Student Writing

As Sara E. Sanders and John H. Littlefield (1975) point

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out, people interested in evaluating writing have learned how to make very *reliable* judgments about students' work. Using such procedures as those described by Charles Cooper (1975) we can be fairly confident that our estimations of students' work is not idiosyncratic, that our judgments are likely to be shared by other competent evaluators. But, Sanders and Littlefield contend, we have not been sufficiently concerned with making *valid* judgments about students' writing. We have given too little attention to the problem of whether our reliable judgments actually tell us something significant about our students' work. Sanders and Littlefield suggest several ways we must change current evaluation procedures if we are to make judgments that are both reliable and valid. I shall discuss what I see as the two most important changes.

Assignments must specify the purpose for writing as well as the mode in which students are to write. As part of a study of community college students' writing, Charles Cooper and I gave students at a local community college this writing assignment.

Expository Essay

When you walk through any parking lot, it's almost certain that you will see a lot of cars with bumper stickers. Their messages vary widely and reflect their owners' differing personalities, attitudes, and experiences. For example:

SAILORS HAVE MORE FUN
THANK GOD I'M IRISH (OR POLISH, OR...)
POW'S NEVER HAVE A NICE DAY
AMERICA LOVE IT OR LEAVE IT
SMITH FOR SHERIFF
VISIT CARLSBAD CAVERNS
MILK DRINKERS MAKE BETTER LOVERS

Write an essay in response to the following assignment:

Assume that you are looking at a car (not your own) with one or more bumper stickers on it. The bumper stickers may be taken from the list above, or they may be bumper stickers you've seen elsewhere. What reasonable guesses can you make about the personality, attitudes, and/or experiences of the person who owns the car you're looking at? Explain your answer in a detailed, carefully thought out expository essay.

Our request for an expository essay brought a great diversity of responses, as the following excerpts from three different essays will suggest.

I. The bumper sticker that brought most of my attention was *Thank God I'm an American*. Obviously, the person who owns this car is proud that he or she lives in America. The person might also be fed up with other people who have stickers that say Thank God I'm Irish or some other country. The person might have realized that after all of the trouble in the world, the best place to be is in America.

II. From my experiences as a driver, I'm always amazed at the different bumper stickers that I come across every year. The one sticker I see frequently is "Thank God I'm Polish." It's the way their put on, however, that amuses me. Usually the Polish stickers are up-side down. I view this person as being able to laugh at himself and sees the funny side of a situation before others do. This driver obviously knows his ethnical background is the butt of many jokes and instead of taking offense he sees the humorous side of his background. This type of person should be admired because he can use a bumper sticker to show he has a sense of humor.

III. The bumper sticker read, "Honk if you're horny," and was stuck on the man's bright orange sports car. Looking very straight and conservative, he seemed somewhat embarrassed. Dressed in a brown suit, white shirt, and brown tie, he looked very meek and mild. He seemed as if he did not want to look around at the other drivers or passengers of the cars stopped at the red light. His attention was fixed only on the top of the steering wheel. I imagined the orange car could not have been his own; maybe it was his daughter's or his son's. As we both sat at the red light, with cars surrounding us on both sides, a young kid in the car behind him beeped his horn. The man looked up very quickly, wishing maybe that the light had changed. No, it was still red. Only the color of the man's face had changed—to bright red. I could see in his face he was thinking of the sticker....

It's tempting to conclude that these essays reflect differences in the students' writing abilities. Perhaps they do. But it seems fair—and probably more useful—to observe that the excerpts reflect differences in students' sense of their purpose in writing. Apparently the first student saw his job as one of suggesting several inferences various people might draw about each of several bumper stickers. The second student seems to have set out to do something different. Instead of posing several inferences, he began by expressing his own main reaction to bumper stickers in general and one bumper sticker in particular. He then went on to draw conclusion and finished by advocating an attitude toward a certain type of person. The third student seems to have undertaken still another task: entertaining his reader by re-creating a scene which would dramatize the incongruity of a bumper sticker's message and a driver's personality.

For our study, this diversity of purpose presented no problem. We simply wanted to find our how students would respond to our assignment. Our interest was in description, not in evaluation. If, however, we had been trying to evaluate students' success with a given writing task, we'd have been in trouble. Apparently, students were not doing one task but several tasks, each of which was, seemingly, based on each student's individual sense of purpose for the writing. This predicament was largely of our own making. We assumed, as do many teachers and researchers, that by specifying a mode (exposition) we were engaging students in a common writing task. Obviously our assumption was wrong; even within a given mode, purposes for writing can vary significantly. Our assignment asked students to "explain" their reasonable guesses in a "carefully thought-our expository essay." But to whom were they to explain their inferences? What did "explaining" entail? And what purpose were they to have for explaining? Were they to try to amuse a good friend who would likely share many of their assumptions? Were they to defend their conclusion to someone who might have a different opinion? Were they simply to express their own reaction as fully as possible, without worrying about how an audience might react? If we had been interested in evaluating students' work, our assignment itself should have answered some of these questions; as Sanders and

Littlefield point out, we should have specified a clear purpose for writing as well as the mode in which students were to write.

Criteria must be appropriate to the purpose specified by the assignment. Because our three community college writers were attempting different tasks, they present an additional problem for evaluators. If the writers had been asked to speculate, to consider alternative explanations of a phenomenon, we would have to consider essay I superior to essays II and III. It is the only essay that suggests different hypotheses (in this case, different reasons a driver might have had in putting a given bumper sticker on his/her car). Granted, it is not very good speculative writing; the student does not consider any of the alternatives very fully. But he does suggest more than one explanation, something that essays II and III do not do.

These latter two essays have their own distinctive qualities, and it seems unreasonable to judge them by the criterion I suggested for essay I. This criterion would lead me to give a low grade to essay III, one of the few essays in the entire collection that I actually enjoyed reading. Such a procedure would be unfair. But no more so than another widespread practice: judging all writing in a given mode by a single criterion. Consider the following assignment and student responses.

> Imagine that a large company near you has been found to be seriously polluting a local river. Some people have been talking about closing the company down until something can be done about the pollution. If the company is closed down, many people will be out of work. Write your feelings about whether to shut down the company. Be sure to indicate why you feel the way you do.
>
> I. People have been protesting against the evils of industry since the 18 hundreds. I think that it is very unnatural, unsafe, and also unhuman to pollute any river with ill smelling dye or any other form of industrial waste. So feeling this strongly against pollution I would form a group, an anti-pollution group and get the support of some local critics and put into action some means of closing down the company. If this does not work then I would call for the government to help to correct the abuse. And would advocate a new system of purifying the water.
>
> II. I think they shouldn't because the people need jobs to support there family. That is why we have poor people is either because of there color or they didn't go to school. More and more people are moving they need jobs badly. Look at the people in Rochester that just hang around because they have no money because there Black. All of the white people blame them for stealing the money that they need for there family or some of them steal it for dope or drinking money. The people are polluting in the river and killing fish. Why can't they put it in something so that it didn't pollute the water. Now we can't get clean fish and eat the fish because they have grease or something else. We see fish floating on the lake because they pollute in the water.

If we judge these essays by conventional expository criteria, essay I is apparently the better. Its syntax is more complex, less garbled; words are longer, more "mature" sounding; it is organized and not self contradictory. But in some ways, the first essay is not as thoughtful as the second. The first writer takes a very simple view of the problem: pollution is "unnatural, unsafe, and also unhuman" and we should, therefore, close the offending company. The second writer—although unable to avoid a self-contradiction—sees more of the complexity of the problem: Pollution is bad, but so is unemployment. Moreover, although I have no special sympathy for companies that pollute, I am more attracted to the second student's arguments. The student's first sentence raises an issue that I—coming from an area where unemployment is well above the national average—feel very strongly about; the student has established a common concern that makes me more willing to listen to his point.

In praising the second student's essay, I do not mean to suggest we should ignore problems in the writing. The student clearly has difficulties with, among other things, organization. But I do want to insist that it would be a mistake to compound those problems by invoking a single expository criterion that would blind us to the strengths of his essay while obscuring the weaknesses of the other students' writing.

Using New Procedures to Assess Students' Writing Ability

The arguments I've advanced thus far have been greatly influenced by work Richard Lloyd-Jones has done for the National Assessment of Educational Progress. Lloyd-Jones 1977 reports that in devising ways to survey the writing ability of large numbers of students, he was guided by several assumptions:

> 1. "a valid (or publicly acceptable and persuasive) test [of writing ability] requires both a sample of discourse and a human reaction—a piece of writing generated to reflect the writer's choices rather than a test maker's choices and a critical response which is affective as well as cognitive and interprets unconventional and creative language as well as reports conventional devices";
> 2. "the writer of a good technical report may not be able to produce an excellent persuasive letter to a city council";
> 3. "a precise description or census of writing skills is far richer in information if the observations are categorized according to the purpose."

Working from these assumptions, Lloyd-Jones tried to devise writing tasks that specified the purpose for which students were to write. That is, each task indicated whether students' primary concern was with expressing their own feelings, reactions, and attitudes, with persuading someone else on a debatable issue, or with simply explaining a subject without trying to be expressive or persuasive.

To evaluate writing elicited by these tasks, Lloyd-Jones devised "primary trait" scoring procedures. These procedures ask judges to read students' writing and determine whether it has certain basic features that are uniquely appropriate for the purpose students are trying to achieve in a particular piece of writing. For example: one of the NAEP writing tasks presents students with the quote "A woman's place is in the home" and asks them to express their points of view on this issue. For purposes of scoring, Lloyd-Jones suggests that one primary trait of writing

that effectively articulates one's viewpoint is the presence of a number of reasons that support the writer's position, especially if those reasons are elaborated upon. Consequently, Lloyd-Jones first asks readers to give students' papers a rating of 1 to 4, using these guidelines:

1 = DOES NOT TAKE A CLEAR POSITION, OR TAKES A POSITION BUT GIVES NO REASONS
2 = TAKES A POSITION AND GIVES ONE UNELABORATED REASON
3 = TAKES A POSITION AND GIVES ONE ELABORATED REASON, ONE ELABORATED PLUS ONE UNELABORATED REASON, OR TWO OR THREE UNELABORATED REASONS
4 = TAKES A POSITION AND GIVES TWO OR MORE ELABORATED REASONS, ONE ELABORATED PLUS TWO OR MORE UNELABORTED REASONS, OR FOUR OR MORE UNELABORATED REASONS

In addition to these initial judgments, readers also determine the kinds of appeals writers make in defending their position. Specifically, readers indicate whether students have based their appeals on:

conventional wisdom
personal experience
authority
analogy or figurative language
history
legal rights

Finally, judges decide whether the purpose of these appeals is to:

advance the writer's own cause
refute an opponent's position
both advance one's own cause and refute an opponent's arguments.

Although not primarily intended for classroom use, these procedures would help a teacher describe a student's work and suggest criteria for subsequent writings. After using these scoring procedures, a teacher should be able to tell a student something like this: In trying to articulate your ideas on this topic you gave two reasons and elaborated on one of those reasons; you also tried to advance your own point of view by citing personal experience. The next time you attempt a comparable task you might:

give a larger number of reasons
elaborate on more than one of those reasons
develop your argument not only by citing your own experience but also by citing authorities

This sort of comment seems especially useful for the student. It begins not by evaluating but by describing; it gives the student some understanding of his/her performance on the task at hand. Moreover, when this description is combined with the recommendations noted above, the student receives some guidance for future writing; the student learns, for example about kinds of appeals he/she might use in a subsequent attempt to express his/her attitudes or ideas on a given topic: Finally, the combination of description and suggestions for improvement help both teacher and student determine whether subsequent writing is, in fact, improving.

Obviously, procedures from one scoring guide do not identify all the primary traits one might find in good writing. And the format of Lloyd-Jones' scoring guides is more complex than an individual teacher needs for day-to-day work with students. But this example of primary trait scoring seems worth mentioning for two reasons. The scoring guide illustrates a theoretically sound procedure that English teachers might adapt for use in their own classes. Moreover—especially for teachers who are beset by accountability-conscious school boards—primary trait scoring provides a practical alternative to the limited and misleading information generated by standardized tests of writing ability.

Evaluating Unconventional or "Creative" Writing

As we refine our assignments and our criteria, we'll improve our ability to solve a special problem epitomized by the piece of writing in Figure 1, done by an eighth grader who was not terribly fond of writing.

DEAR SECURITY LOVERS:
Let me introduce myself.
I am cuddly; I am fuzzy;
I am small, and I am a necessity.
You may hug me, kiss me, drop me,
Hold me, clothe me, carry me,
Even sleep with me.
I'm a Knickerbocker Exclusive and white
Panda Bear.

FIGURE 1

The assignment that prompted this writing was based on an ad the students' teacher had seen. The ad, for the construction paper used in art class, featured bright geometric shapes obviously cut out of construction paper. It began:

Dear Art Educator:
Let me introduce myself. I am construction paper. You can cut, fold me, shape me, bend me...

The teacher felt certain that the ad, more appealing than

my summary indicates, suggested some forms of visual and verbal composing that students might find challenging. The teacher's intuition proved right; her students enjoyed composing ads for their own products using the stanza pattern of the original. The problem, however, was in deciding how to respond to—let alone evaluate—students' work. It was difficult to talk about the writing in ways that acknowledged the unique composing students had done and, at the same time, related the task to long term goals of the writing program.

Since the writing was based on an ad and intended to sell a product, let's assume (with some qualms) that students saw the task as essentially persuasive. Let's further assume that if persuasive writing is to be effective, it should be based on this premise: "Change takes place over a bridge of shared components." That is, if I am to persuade you to do, act, or believe in a certain way, I must show you that you and I have something in common, that whatever I'm advocating will help you achieve your goals as well as help me achieve mine. The "shared components" in the Panda ad are quite apparent. Actions associated with the product (holding, kissing, hugging) imply security. Even the non-verbal language in the picture of the Panda are appropriate to the audience; the body position is open, accepting, non-threatening. I don't want to belabor a short piece of writing, but I hope my point is clear. Although divergent, whimisical, and "creative," this eighth grader's work reflects qualities that are valuable in *any* persuasive writing (whether an essay, letter to the editor, or dramatization); the student has created bridges of shared components that will help her achieve her purpose of persuading a given audience. Our evaluation of this "ad" should point that out and should encourage the student to make use of this persuasive strategy the next time she tries to write persuasively—no matter what mode she is using. If we make this sort of evaluation response, the writing assignment may accomplish two goals: It may improve her attitude toward writing since the task allowed/inspired her to do a piece of writing that is very successful. It may also help her to see what she needs to do in order to succeed in a subsequent persuasive writing task.

Conclusion

The topic of evaluation is so complex and comprehensive that I have chosen to say little or nothing about certain important problems in evaluating students' writing. I have said nothing about evaluating the writing of large numbers of students. Nor have I dealt with the matter of involving students in the evaluation process. Fortunately, these problems have already been treated in some detail. Charles Cooper (1975) has described procedures one should use in conducting a school-wide evaluation program. Mary Beaven (1977) has provided a very careful discussion of students' roles in evaluation and has explained how one might go about involving students in the evaluative process.

My concern has been less with explaining procedures for carrying out evaluation than with answering some basic questions about evaluation: How shall we make writing assignments that will provide us with the sort of writing we're interested in? What criteria shall we use to judge students' writing? How can we respond effectively to unconventional writings? If we combine my answers to these questions with specific procedures suggested by Cooper and by Beaven, I think we can solve some of the problems I mentioned at the beginning of the paper. As we articulate the purpose—as well as the mode—of a writing assignment, we'll give students a better sense of what their task is and, consequently, improve their chances of success. As we articulate criteria appropriate to the specific purpose of a piece of writing, we shall increase the likelihood that we and our students will come to some reasonable agreement about the quality of a given piece of writing—even if it's something as unconventional as the eighth grader's ad for a panda bear. And finally, we may come to think of evaluation not as a late-night remorse-filled chore but rather as an important part of the process of improving student writing. ■

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Writing Project

(Continued from page 13)

final answer to writing. Learning to write is never over or finished in a neat package. I can always practice; I can always improve.

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WHO DUNIT:

The Mystery of Freshman Composition

Alice Horning

Agatha Christie, comparing herself to her second husband Max Mallowan, a well-known archeologist, characterizes herself as a "lowbrow."[1] If this is a fair judgment (highly unlikely), then her many thousands of fans in countries all over the world might be similarly characterized. Such an appraisal hardly accounts for the appeal of a good mystery, since almost everyone, highbrow and lowbrow alike, enjoys detective fiction. Even Max Mallowan, for whom "light reading [was] . . . a really erudite book on archeology or on classical subjects . . . [made] heavy weather of reading light fiction [i.e. Christie's novels]. [But] he . . . appeared to enjoy his self-imposed task in the end."[2] On this premise, I recently took the suggestion of a colleague of mine[3] and reorganized my teaching of a basic composition course around a murder mystery of my own devising. This strategy for dealing with the rhetorical modes of composition in the absence of literature turned out to have a number of virtues, relatively few flaws and provided a great deal of structure and interest in a course which is often a real struggle to teach. As basic writing programs increasingly turn away from the standard composition-and-literature combination and toward intensive practice in writing, the "lowbrow" mystery plot offers fun and interest, provides topics for papers, and yields an opportunity to work on such "highbrow" matters as logic, library research, and methodical analysis of detail.

Thus, when my colleague revealed that in a recent term he had used a mystery format, my interest as an Agatha Christie devotee was immediately aroused, and subsequently, I got from him the documents in what he called the "Coover case." The Coover case centered around Judge John Coover of Mixville, who was found shot to death in the bedroom of his home on a quiet Sunday afternoon. There were no signs of foul play, but also no murder weapon, and numerous sub-plot details suggested, but did not point directly to, suicide. The students were presented with a series of documents, including a newspaper account of the death of the judge, a floor plan of the house (in classic English country house murder style, cf. eg. Agatha Christie's *Mysterious Affair at Styles*),[4] police interrogation transcripts, letters, and, at one point, a tape of a telephone conversation between the judge's children. Ultimately, the case turned out to be a suicide (the judge's wife had disposed of the murder weapon), and was figured out by most students in the class.

Not only did I find this remarkably clever and intriguing, but also I immediately felt better about the prospect of teaching composition. In a previous term I had suffered with the rhetorical modes content of the course and had used John Holt's *Freedom and Beyond*[5] as a reader for class discussion. These strategies and the handicap of a section which met at 8:30 a.m. during the winter term combined to create a bomb of the worst possible sort. The mystery plot seemed to calm my fears of a repeat performance.

The Coover case, as I received it, had begun relatively late (i.e. the second or third week) in the term. I wanted a case that I could start with and stay with. I also wanted something that, like the Coover case, looked like murder but was not. Thus I was in need of a plot, and especially of a way of having a victim (not too messy, if you please), dead by some clever and very-tough-to-reason-out means.

The *modus operandi* was suggested to me by a Dorothy Sayers story, "Bitter Almonds,"[6] which I read by chance one night before the course began. In the story a well-to-do, older British gentleman dies, seemingly at the hands of one of his financially troubled sons. In fact, as Montague Egg, Sayers' wine and liqueur salesman-cum-sleuth reveals, the old man died by accident. He had consumed a glass of the liqueur noyaux, which is made from bitter almonds, and which had been sold to him by Egg a long time before. As the noyaux stood, the oil of bitter almonds, also known as hydrocyanic acid or cyanide, had risen to the top of the bottle and what the

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old man had poured for himself was in fact practically pure poison.

A quick search in the library told me that several more contemporary liqueurs, such as Kirsch, are also made from peach pits (bitter almonds). Armed with this information and the basic concept of accidental poisoning from Sayers, I was able to sketch a plot which would allow the students to write in all the requisite rhetorical modes, would send them to the library, and would draw on their knowledge of chemistry, biology, psychology and criminal justice.

My first problem was to set a scene in which the death might take place, and to provide a sufficient number of characters and a locale that the students would recognize and find reasonable. I thus chose to make the victim a member of the junior faculty of a college psychology department and the setting a dinner party for ten people at the home of the department chairman. I was not sure at the outset whether the house itself would be relevant with respect to floor plans and such, but wanting some mystique, I housed the chairman in Grosse Pointe. We began with a process paper, explaining the planning of the party, with the format of the invitation and menu (including liqueurs) provided by me. This led to some lively discussions about how the invitations were to be extended, and about the running of the party (caterers, a butler and maid, buffet, and so on). Various plans were offered in the papers.

By the third week of the term we had a body on the living room floor. Dr. Ellen Queen had collapsed about an hour after dinner, according to a newspaper account I provided to the students. She had complained to her husband, Richard, of an upset stomach and died as they were preparing to depart. Richard asked for a police investigation, as his wife was not on friendly terms with all the guests at the party. The students wrote next a description paper, describing the scene as the police found it when they arrived. We discussed plagiarism (which Dr. Queen had found in the work of the protégé of a colleague who was at the party) in some detail, as the students prepared to go to the library to research to cause of death. The coroner's preliminary reports showed that Dr. Queen had swallowed something poisonous, but it was not known what the poison was. The students suggested various examples of poison—botuism, allergic reaction, a poison created by a drug/alcohol combination, or the more straightforward poisoning with arsenic or the like added to food or drink. The assignment here was to research examples of poison, with several students writing on each possibility that emerged in class discussion. The research provided them with specific examples to discuss, as well as source material to quote from and cite properly. Since about one-third of the class were facing a research paper assignment in another course that term or knew they would face such an assignment in the future, they found this assignment especially helpful.

This assignment helped to unify the class because at this point it became important to share the information they gathered in individual research. The biology, chemistry, and pre-med majors became class authorities in these discussions, although one student, herself plagued by severe allergies, became resident expert on the allergy possibility. As we discussed possible causes of death, it became less clear whether a crime had been committed and if so, which one.

We were thus led to the problem of definition, and here, I must say, I had an edge that other composition teachers might not have. My husband is an attorney and was able to provide me with a number of legal definitions for the students to consider including those of murder, manslaughter, and homicide. The students were asked to write a preliminary report on the case for the chief of detectives, defining the crime in the case. Naturally, some students were stuck on a suicide possibility, but they then had to define suicide and get into the murky moral and ethical questions of whether suicide is a crime. There was considerable discussion of this issue along with the possibilities of negligence, conspiracy and so on.

At this point the term was half over, and none of the characters had been interrogated or had made statements to the police. The latter half of the term was devoted to the suspects, and here it was a little difficult to maintain the momentum of the early part of the term. Even in the best Agatha Christies the process of questioning the suspects is a bit slow. Some students let me know about this via a midterm course evaluation,[7] and I thus gave the class the option of writing on topics other than the mystery on three of the five remaining essays. Even students who were interested in the case took a break from writing about it at some point in the latter part of the term, but none complained of having nothing to write on. Meanwhile, no student had come close to figuring out "whodunit."

For the cause and effect assignment the class was presented with a transcript of the interrogation of the victim's husband, Richard Queen, by the detective in the case, S. Holmes. In this discussion Detective Holmes learned that Richard Queen was heir to an income of $50,000 a year from his wife's estate. The income derived from a trust administered by the Sloan Guaranty Trust Company.[8] The text of Ellen Queen's will was provided to the students with the assignment to analyze the possible and/or probable causes for the death of Ellen Queen. The students were asked to look at the case psychologically at this point, and all the psychology majors started feeling pretty frisky.

My next task was to set up a classification assignment, and I was beginning to want to lead the class to narrow the range of suspects so that we could get on to comparison/contrast, analysis and an argument for an indictment. Thus for the classification assignment I presented statements from three participants in the dinner party, set in such a way as to eliminate some characters as suspects. In the essay students had to classify all characters

in the case in terms of some relevant set of categories such as innocence or guilt, murderers vs. non-murderers, and so on. There was considerable speculation in class discussion about the personalities of the characters, their motives, and their backgrounds.

When the classification papers came in, it was clear that some characters had been virtually eliminated and that my class of sleuths wanted to question certain characters again. The document was a second interrogation of the victim's husband and an additional discussion with the suspect most students suggested was guilty. In addition, the department chairman was questioned for the first time. With this material the students were asked to compare and contrast two suspects with respect to guilt or innocence. Also in the questioning of the chairman, the fact that Ellen Queen was the only guest to drink Kirsch from an old bottle mentioned. Only one student picked up on this fact—a man who hopes someday to be an attorney. And even he did not see the connection of the Kirsch to the victim's death.

I pointedly mentioned the Kirsch again in a chart listing motive, method and opportunity for the three most likely suspects according to the students. The analysis paper asked for a discussion of the key facts in the case, concentrating on motive, method and opportunity for each of the major suspects. Students were told that they should write the analysis as a preliminary to an argument, in the form of the final exam, for a solution to the case. The argument was the final writing assignment, and in it, the students argued for an indictment against one or another of the characters. No one in the class figured out what had happened. When the students handed in their finals, I gave them copies of the Dorothy Sayers story about the accidental poisoning and told them the solution to the case was contained therein. I assume that they all figured it out, as none of them came to ask for a fuller explanation of the outcome of the case.

Although the second half of the course did drag a bit, the final course evaluations suggest that the students really enjoyed the case. The drag probably derived in part from the "seventh week slump" that inevitably descends in composition courses and in part from a lack of significant events in the case. I hope to improve the plot as I use it again, incorporating, perhaps, a taped conversation between two suspects, a disappearance or other major complication for the latter part of the course. However, if a short drag in the seventh week or so is the only real flaw in this approach, it seems to offer distinct advantages over non-theme strategies for basic composition.

From the students' perspective the greatest virtue to the mystery plot is that it is interesting and fun. From some students I got the distinct impression that their previous experience led them to believe English could *never* be fun. Moreover, at some point during the term, virtually every student was able to bring his or her areas of interest and expertise to bear upon the case. This involvement kept everyone interested in the course, the case, and each other—a strong virtue at an urban commuter school.

For me the interest and fun were derived from the fact that I was Agatha Christie, running the plot from my typewriter with a little help from the class. I also found it much easier to teach the rhetorical modes this way and did not have to hear "I have nothing to write about" during the term. Such relatively "lowbrow" satisfaction was not the least of my success. This format allowed me to bring the research paper and plagiarism problem into the course in context and to give the students a chance to do the library paper and learn to get the format for citations right before they did research for their other courses. As I see increasing numbers of cases of plagiarism in my upper division courses, I think this aspect of composition becomes more and more crucial. Finally, the "highbrow" aspects of the mystery scheme allowed me to talk with the class in indirect ways about the importance of logic and attention to detail. The case forced them to try to reason out what had happened and forced them to concentrate on the details of the case as clues. The research on poisons is an example of this focus on detail. They had to examine the menu and study who was in the kitchen, who poured drinks, and so on. They had to look carefully and precisely at who did and said what, when, and where, and try to piece together, a la Columbo, Dick Tracy, and Miss Marple, just what happened. In developing such skills, *while* developing their writing, I think my students gained control over many of the types of assignments they will face in college.

It seems that the mystery plot has major virtues as an interesting and enjoyable way of organizing the rhetorical modes composition course so that students can work on logic and analysis as well as research procedures and basic writing strategies and has relatively few flaws. Thus, perhaps this case will provide a *modus operandi* for others struggling with the mystery of basic composition. ■

FOOTNOTES

[1]Agatha Christie, *An Autobiography* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1977), p. 541.

[2]Christie, p. 443.

[3]For the whole concept of using a mystery plot as organizing theme and for the documents in the Coover case, I am indebted to Professor John Reed of the English Department at Wayne State University.

[4]*The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1975).

[5]*Freedom and Beyond* (New York: Dell Laurel Editions, 1972).

[6]Dorothy Sayers, "Bitter Almonds," in *In the Teeth of the Evidence*, by Dorothy Sayers (New York: Avon Books, 1967), pp. 55-66.

[7]For the idea of asking students to write an informal course evaluation at midterm, when the instructor still has a chance to correct major student miseries, I am indebted to Professor Julia S. Falk of the Linguistics Department, Michigan State University.

[8]The Sloan is a fictitious financial institution created by Emma Lathen to serve as the place of employment for her trust officer/sleuth, John Putnam Thatcher. See him at work in *Murder To Go* (New York): Simon and Schuster, 1969).

Composition topics that

FRUCTIFY

Eugene Smith

I have adopted an organic metaphor as the most conspicuous part of my title because I am thinking about a living process, a process of composing with words. As we know, most of that process is invisible, inaccessible to another's or even, perhaps, to our own inspection. It is a process made up of what we loosely and probably arbitrarily classify as intellectual and emotional elements, often so tightly bound together and so persistently interacting that we cannot say which is which or which is more important in bringing forth a piece of discourse.

Because I believe that organic metaphors are probably as close as we can come to describing and explaining much of the process of composition, I assert that they are of great interest to us teachers of composition and that pursuing them in some detail may be instructive to us in our efforts to help young people compose with words, both oral and written.

> **FRUCTIFY:** *tr.*, to cause to produce fruit; make fruitful or productive
> *intr.*, to bear fruit
> *(The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language)*

I am presuming to help you think about how you can help your students find topics for speaking and writing and then develop them in ways that satisfy both themselves and their audiences. To do this, I have three questions to guide my remarks and your pursuit of them:

1. **Where does a topic for composition come from?**
2. **How can a teacher help students to invent the development of a topic?**
3. **Why may finding and developing topics that fructify be the most important part of the composition process?**

In answering these questions, I think foremost of teachers in fairly conventional kinds of school and college classrooms, of both spoken and written composition, and of occasions for composition not limited to classrooms. What I say arises largely out of my own teaching of and thinking about composition, with aid and support from numerous other writers.

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Where does a topic for composition come from? There are two main sources: first, a topic which is selected and assigned by a teacher, an editor (if one is writing for a newspaper or magazine), a program chairperson (if one is to be a speaker), or an employer (if one's job involves formalized speaking and writing); alternatively, the topic is self-chosen by the composer to fit the roughed-out specifications of an assignment or to fit the composer's own internally generated need to compose. I believe that both of these main sources have a proper place in classrooms and that teachers can accommodate them. I believe, further, that among the principal means for accommodating them is a thorough examination of the functions of purpose and audience in all deliberate communication. (I am sure that purpose and audience have pronounced effects on communication that is not so deliberate, but I am restricting my examination to language which is carefully composed, often revised or reexamined, and generally intended to have some durable effect or value. That definition excludes the language of "phatic communion," those ritualized uses like "How are you doing, John?" which serve more as social cement than as conveyors of explicit and developed ideas.) When we think of selection of a topic as a necessary function of specifying purpose and audience, we accomplish more of the composition than may be immediately obvious.

Consider a few specific topics that might be assigned by a program chair, an editor, an employer, a teacher:

—describe and explain at our next community club meeting the plans for widening a major arterial in our community, and show the residents how it may affect their travel, their property, and the general health of the community;

—write an account of how the recent lack of snow has affected the owners of nearby ski resorts, an account to be published in Sunday's edition of this newspaper;

—tell a group of employees about the proposed changes in their health and accident coverage;

—explain your opinion on the values and uses of grades in schools and colleges as a basis for discus-

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sion of a possible policy for grading in this class.

In each of these four cases, a specific purpose is an inherent part of the assignment, a specific audience is included, and presumably each of the hypothetical writers, because of their known backgrounds and conditions of employment or enrollment, has special knowledge or interest in the topic. If these conditions are indeed met, then it appears that the assignment of the topics is legitimate, and the assigner can reasonably expect a piece of discourse which is at least intended to meet the specifications. Topic, purpose, and audience are in harmony, a harmony which successful communication must have.

Let's look at the teacher-assigned specific topic more closely, though. As I think about the many composition topics I know to have been suggested and used, I recall that many of them did not meet these conditions. The teacher-assigned topic may arise from something read, discussed, or observed in common, but the likely purpose is less to inform someone else than it is to inform the student, both about the topic itself and about the act of composing. In other words, the typical school composition topic is turned in on itself, not serving a purpose in the world at large or even for the other people in that one classroom, not directed at any audience in particular but at a teacher who may subsequently "correct" it. When judged by the criteria of "real world" communication, the typical composition topic and its treatment are dry-runs, very dry and often lethargically run. Multiply the occasions for this kind of composition and you will have ample evidence of the deadness and vacuousness of much school writing. As the rhetorical context narrows and detaches itself almost entirely from language used for deliberate purposes in solving problems of living, the resulting composition becomes a desiccated thing.

Furthermore, since an ostensible purpose of assigning topics for composition is to teach techniques of composition, there is a common tendency to oversimplify and to reduce to formulas the stages of composition. Teachers and textbooks say essentially this: 1) select your topic, 2) think about what you want to say, 3) plan your ideas, preferably with a written outline, 4) write a first draft, 5) revise and edit that draft, 6) present your composition to the teacher, 7) allow time for the teacher to evaluate the composition, 8) study the evaluation and use the advice in dealing with your next composition topic. Most of us would probably concede that composition does not proceed in quite such linear fashion, that the neatness of this linearity is only superficial, that the normal composition process has many more curlicues and switchbacks than this list suggests. Yet, we may be tempted to say, composing *ought* to proceed in this fashion, and it is tempting to think that professional writers proceed so.

Understandably, perhaps, we prefer to hide our messes, and actual composition is often messy. I assert that selecting a topic is not the decisive and logically first act that this list makes it seem. The topic is not just the word or phrase that may briefly express the focus of the discourse; it is what each speaker or writer adds to that word or phrase that is the topic, or what the discourse is really about, and that is an emergent part of the discourse. Therefore, describing the parts of the composition process must include awareness of the ways that such elements of the rhetorical situation as sense of purpose and audience impinge on the process. If the composer has only a vague sense or is confused about the necessary limits imposed by a specific purpose and audience, that composer is severely handicapped in composing deliberately. It is out of a heightened awareness of controlling purpose and audience that thought about the topic grows, and the act of composing itself alters the nature of the topic, its significance to the composer, and its treatment. The topic fructifies as it takes unique form in each composer. As it fructifies, the composer is articulating his or her own world via this topic because s/he is discovering what to say about it and the saying is forcing him or her to discover.

If this idea of articulating one's own world—that is, making meaning via one's composed perceptions of the world—is a valid aim for composition, and I cannot think of a better one, then I believe that any assignment of a topic for composition should include explicit attention to the implications of purpose and audience. Every assigned topic *may* specify a subject (such as grading, a literary work, a current issue, a physical object), but it *must* specify a purpose which can seem plausible to the composer and an audience which that composer can either actually reach with the discourse or readily imagine reaching. Without these two dimensions, the topic is not a topic for composition but an inert bit of matter which cannot fructify.

When the subject matter for composition is not specified by a teacher or other agent external to the composer, the composition situation is perilously open. In fact, the topicless assignment is often perceived by students as so open as to be paralyzing. Write about anything? Where do I start? Anything turns out to be more nearly a vacuum than a full reservoir of possibilities. It is quite a different matter, however, for the person who writes independently with self-generated topics. This kind of expression results from a tension to express an idea or feeling, or perhaps from that apparently universal urge to tell a story. The causes for such tension may never be fathomed, enmeshed as they are in the mysteries of human creativity. As Rollo May puts it, in his recent book, *The Courage to Create* (Bantam, 1976), creativity is an encounter between a human being and an objective reality, a physical world "out there." The poet's labor is a struggle with the meaninglessness and silence of the world until he can force it to mean; until he can make the silence answer and the Non-being be." (p. 89) It is not only the medium of poetry that permits such an encounter and gives form to the meanings wrested by it; any artistic medium will suffice. Whatever the medium, there is a state of heightened consciousness which accom-

panies or creates the tension; the topic arises according to the focus of that consciousness; and the choice of a form is the particular means for shaping the meanings.

I hope that no teacher underestimates the significance of this self-generated process, even though there may be little we can do directly to initiate or sustain it. At the least, however, we can encourage it to occur both in and out of schools. Specifically, we can ask questions about the world and human activity which cannot be conclusively answered. We can show students that literature does this all the time and that one of the principal reasons for reading literature is to be stimulated by such questions and by artful attempts to answer them. We can encourge students to ask these perplexing questions, too, and we can adroitly mention that their own writing can be a satisfying way to pursue the questions. And, as students start taking the bait, we can try to establish conditions which will encourage encounters with the meaningless to fructify—conditions that include psychological space, physical space, time to create, and an authentic response to the verbal creations. If we were to take seriously our need to do these things, we might legitmately claim some contributions to the nourishment of future writers of literature, and we might even demonstrate to those less talented that self-generated writing is a fulfilling activity.

If, however, teachers are to impose topicless assignments, they need to consider carefully the kind of limits which will make the assignment fructify. The phenomenon of limits as a requisite for creativity cannot be passed over casually. Rollo May points out that "limits are not only unavoidable, they are also valuable . . . creativity itself requires limits, for the creative act arises out of the struggle of human beings with and against that which limits them." (*The Courage to Create*, pp. 134-5) In the case of writing, it is the form which primarily determines the limits for creativity, and it is the composer's struggles to express meaning within the form that cause the tension and the search of one's imagination. The teacher's cue, then, is to specify those aspects of form that are likely to be most stimulating to imagination and most productive of a positive kind of tension or anxiety. The student writer needs to feel that anxiety but in such a way that he feels that he is controlling it. How best to establish a sense of control? By creating a situation where the composer can visualize the choices that can be made, choices which are within his or her present repertoire of knowledge and abilities. And I assert that the best way to provide those limits and assure that each composer can make his or her own choices is to describe purpose and audience.

Assuming an expository form (e.g., letter, essay, report, factual narrative), the writer's ability to germinate and develop a topic will be both enhanced and guided by his or her clear perception of the teacher-specified purpose and audience. They should be tied as closely as possible to actual needs and situations for writing in the world outside classrooms, though imagination may have to substitute for actually reaching and getting responses from all the audiences which a teacher might incorporate in writing assignments. In the topicless assignment, then, the subject for composing is left to the student, but the impetus and the limits for choice of a possible subject arise out of the student's strong awareness of an assignment that is rhetorically specific.

Given the conviction that such an assignment is valid for teaching composition, how does a teacher help students to invent the development of a topic? Since invention, the earliest stage of finding something to say, is the hardest part of composition for most people to do and the hardest part of composition to teach, a teacher may feel most helpless in knowing how to intervene. In fact, the likelihood is that most teachers do not intervene at all. They simply say, "Start developing your ideas, perhaps by free association writing or by making an outline." Or they may talk with students about the various habits that a writer needs to establish in order to make the ideas come, habits which encourage persistence and concentration. Making such suggestions and having students discuss their various techniques are probably helpful ways of showing young writers that there are many good systems for getting writing started and that no two people are likely to go about it in exactly the same way.

However, the most regularly usable help in developing a topic is likely to be the pointing out of specific consequences of purpose and audience in each assignment.

Consider some examples of composition sequences which will strongly and actively impose limits on every stage of the composition process but which also allow the composer plenty of room for choice of subject matter and method of handling it. Note too that each purpose is integrated with a type of audience but that the composer still has room to further specify and visualize that audience. Further, notice that each of these purpose/audience situations is subject to variation so that none of them is likely to be fully explored for any one composition and each can therefore be reused many times.

1. Describe some object so as to convey a dominant attitude toward the object, but don't overtly state that attitude; let it be inferred by the reader or listener who has also seen an object similar to the one you are describing but who is interested in experiencing this particular one through your senses. In one case, the audience wants you to adopt an "objective" attitude, one which implies that you are simply trying to give factual information about the object; this audience might be a lawyer, an administrator, an employer, or a scientist who has asked you to tell what you saw, felt, smelled, tasted, or heard. Your attitude is therefore apparently detached, dispassionate, unbiased, but of course you should not seem bored or uncaring. In another case, your audience wants to savor your less-than-objective attitude toward the object but does not want to be harangued or to be addressed with the directness of an advertisement; you need to be subtle

in implying your attitude but also to be sure that one consistent attitude toward the object pervades your description.

2. Narrate an event or a series of actions involving living things, probably people or other animals, though nonliving things may be elements in their actions. Your audience is someone whom you will reach in a letter, or it may be readers of a magazine in which eye-witness accounts regularly appear. This audience wants to be both emotionally and intellectually stimulated by your narrative, but you may decide whether the audience is more interested in vicariously participating in the event than in knowing your interpretation of its significance. In either case, your telling of the event should make it come alive again by making use of sensuous images.

3. Explain a process—how something works or why certain actions are performed as they are. Your aim is to clarify for your audience the interrelationships or reasons involved in your subject, those dimensions of it which are not obvious on the surface. Your explanation should make plain a way of observing the process which the audience had not already discovered or was unlikely to know. Since the audience has come to your explanation with a desire to be informed, you should assume the audience's ignorance of the subject but you must avoid insulting the audience's intelligence by carefully assessing related knowledge that the audience probably has.

4. State an opinion on a subject which your audience already has knowledge of and is also likely to have opinions about. If you assume that most of those opinions are quite similar to your own, you may choose to give reinforcing evidence in support of the view held in common; if you assume considerable diversity in opinion among your audience, you may choose to show why opinions contrary to yours are less valid and why a reasonable person is likely to hold your view. Your audience may be your peers, or it may be a mixed group; you should specify your target group in considerable detail.

5. Amuse and perhaps enlighten your audience by showing them a new way of looking at some part of the world—a way that arises from taking a different perspective from "normal" ways of looking and thinking. Using description, or narration, or explanation, turn something upside down, inside out, or tip it sideways—I mean either literally or figuratively—and fill your audience full of details about what is to be noticed with that new perspective. Let surprise be one of the principal effects you try to create, but consider the possible serious significance that this surprising revelation can have. You may want to imagine your audience as quite sophisticated and therefore able to appreciate any clever devices of language that you can present, or you may think of the audience as reluctant to see things in new ways but more likely to be encouraged to do so by indirect means than by admonition or a totally serious approach.

I have only sketched what might be suggested to students about visualizing and targeting the purpose and audience for each assignment. In using any of these starters, you would of course discuss them in more particular ways, sometimes narrowing down the purpose and audience yourself and sometimes urging students to do it individually. I suggest such questions as the following for use in particularized discussion about audience:

—Does your audience have any background of knowledge and experience which bears upon your topic? What are some of the possible specific experiences?

—At what level of complexity and concreteness will the audience be likely to understand this topic and the way you will develop it?

—Under what physical circumstances is the audience likely to hear or read what you say about the topic?

—What would you like the audience to do or think or feel as a result of reading or hearing your composition?

—What kinds of response from the audience should you expect, and what form is it likely to come in?

—What reward might you expect from having communicated with this audience?

—What are you likely to do or think or feel as a result of having communicated with this audience?

—If other people are communicating with this audience on the same or a similar topic, what are they possibly saying? Are you in any sort of competition with those others?

—Is your audience likely to judge your communication as much by the most easily visible or audible elements of form as by the more complex elements of content and strategy?

To develop conscious awareness of these kinds of questions so that they pervade the act of composition at all stages is, I maintain, to trigger ideas for developing the topic and to give the student a focused sense of direction. The combination is more likely to make the topics fructify than formulaic instructions which propose an abstractly logical, linear series of steps. Furthermore, these considerations of purposes and audience will automatically suggest criteria for evaluating the finished composition, criteria which are not arbitrarily imposed and vaguely stated but criteria which are a specific and inherent part of that communicative act.

The teacher's role is to help students articulate those criteria, inductively, and to arrange the class so that students later apply them to their fellows' compositions and formulate reasoned evaluations. Using such a process frees the teacher from being the sole judge of composition and does away with the obsolete need to "correct" students' compositions. Judgments will become much less matters of right and wrong and more nearly gradations of success in accomplishing communication goals. Do you see the shift away from the flabby, lifeless "theme" which has been so characteristic of school writing, especially beyond elementary school? If I have been at all successful in persuading you that some of our most important

teaching comes before students actually begin writing or preparing their oral compositions, I expect that the answer to this question is at least a qualified yes. I also want to make the further claim that the stage of composition that I have been describing may be the most important part of the composition process in which a teacher can intervene.

Reflect, if you will, on those other parts of composition that our textbooks tell us are directly teachable and important to composing well.

—note-taking techniques
—steps in organizing outlines
—paragraph structures
—sentence structures
—vocabulary choice
—punctuation rules
—spelling and other format requirements
—oral delivery techniques

True, there are some generalizations about these matters that seem to apply to many kinds of composition, but none of them helps much in generating composition. They usually apply after the person has determined what to say, and they tend to be heavily influenced by conventions of composing and therefore require convergence of thought, a convergence that may well occur too early in the composing process. The invention stage which I have been examining draws upon divergent, essentially creative, thought, which needs different kinds of limits or guides. The composer should perceive or feel these limits as intimately related to the shaping of thought and feeling, not as forced upon him prematurely by the second-order conventions of form. I referred earlier to the anxiety which is a normal part of composition and the need to make it a positive, nourishing force. The best way for a teacher to help students use that force is to lead them into patient and attentive consideration of the expectations of their intended audiences, their reasons for wanting to meet those audiences' expectations, and the inevitable struggle with mind, feelings, and hands to understand and deal with the demands which these expectations entail. Such help will encourage students to see that the second-order conventions have a necessary and proper place in their composition efforts, but that it is not these conventions that are the significant shaping forces. When they realize that, composition may not get easier, but they may see composition for what it really is—our way of making the world mean. ■

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